

# Bhakti-Yoga: The Historical Dimension

by Georg Feuerstein, Ph.D.

In view of the great popularity of Hatha-Yoga in the West, other fine forms or branches of Yoga have become eclipsed. Among them is Bhakti-Yoga, which has a far longer history than the Yoga of “force” (*hatha*). In fact, the path of devotion (*bhakti-mârga*) has its roots in the mystical ritualism of the ancient *Vedas*. These archaic Sanskrit scriptures are now thought to be well over four thousand years old.

The Vedic seers (*rishi*) invoked various deities during their sacrificial rites. For instance, one Vedic hymn says of God Agni (the deity of the inner and outer fire) that he is “worthy of praise,” and the sages beseeched him to make himself as easily accessible “as a father is to a son.” Another hymn (*Rig-Veda* 4.24.6-7 and 11), which is dedicated to Indra, addresses the deity as follows:

Indra gives comfort to him who, truly presses the *soma* [i.e., the precious plant yielding the nectar of immortality] for him who longs for it [i.e., Indra]. He, with eager interest, makes a friend of that devotee in his struggles.

He who today presses the *soma* for Indra, prepares the cakes, and fries the barley—upon him Indra who loves the hymns of that devoted servant bestows the power of wish-fulfillment.

Now, Indra, lauded and glorified with praises, let fortune like a river swell for the worshiper. O Lord of Horses, a new hymn has been fashioned for you. May we, possessed of [mental] chariots be ever diligent in your praise.

The Vedic approach to worship led in due course to the full-fledged path of devotion, which always revolves around the worship of the Divine as a Supreme Person (*uttama-purusha*), often designated as Lord (*îsh, îsha, îshvara*). Thus Bhakti-Yoga is essentially dualistic, with the worshiper always remaining a devotee even at the highest level of spiritual realization. In other words, unlike other schools of Vedânta, or nondualistic Yoga, the *bhakti* schools acknowledge that the Ultimate Person is infinitely greater than even the most exalted Self-realized sage.

Bhakti-Yoga did not flourish as a clearly delineated path until the time of the *Shvetâshvatara-Upanishad* and the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ*. The former text (6.23), assignable to the fifth or sixth century B.C., but possibly older, mentions the word *bhakti* for the first time and in regard to the worship of the Ultimate in the form of God Shiva.

By the time of the *Bhagavad-Gîtâ* (Lord’s Song), a popular Sanskrit work that was composed perhaps about 400 B.C., the devotional path had achieved some prominence. The *Gîtâ* recollects the teachings given by the God-man Krishna, a divine incarnation (*avatâra*), to Prince Arjuna on the battle field of one of the bloodiest wars fought on Indic soil. This 700-stanza-long work presents, for the first time, Bhakti-Yoga as a formal spiritual path. Krishna is quoted as saying (6.47):

Of all *yogins*, he who loves Me with faith and whose inner self is absorbed in Me—him I deem to be most yoked.

And (18.64):

Be Me-minded, be devoted to Me, sacrifice to Me, salute Me. Thus you will come to Me. I promise you truly, for you are dear to Me.

*Bhakti* signifies both devotion and loving attachment to the Divine. Strictly, the word denotes “participation” (from the verbal root *bhaj* “to participate, partake”): The *yogin* or *yoginî* on the devotional path literally participates in the Divine through surrender, devotion, service, worship, and finally is drawn into mystical union with the Divine. A practitioner of Bhakti-Yoga is called a *bhakta* (lit. “partaker”) or devotee.

Hindu devotionalism naturally also extended to female deities, and the greatest early work in praise of the feminine Divine is the *Devî-Mâhâtmya*. It is embedded in the *Mârkandeya-Purâna* (4th-6th centuries A.D.), and is a splendid document of the Shakta tradition centering on the worship of the Divine Power (*shakti*).

The ideal of devotion became the focus of a whole cultural movement—the so-called *bhakti-mârگا* or “road of devotion.” This movement flourished in the period from 800 to 1100 A.D. This was the time of the creation of the *Bhakti-Sûtra* of Shândilya and the *Bhakti-Sûtra* of Nârada, two aphoristic Sanskrit works codifying the devotional path.

In South India, Bhakti-Yoga was promulgated during this period by the Vaishnava Âlvârs and the Shaiva Nâyanmârs. The Âlvârs (“Deep diving ones”) were a group of twelve Krishna-worshipping saints who created a body of passionate poetry some of which is still sung by the villagers. Their compositions are gathered in the *Nâlâyira-Tivyap-Pirapantam*. Among these saints, whose poems express the delight of ecstasy and yearning for the Divine, Namm Âlvâr achieved lasting fame for his *Tiruvâyoli*. So did Ântâl, the only woman saint in this honored group.

Rejecting the *Vedas*, the Tamil-speaking Shiva worshipers created their own sacred canon, the *Tiru-Murai* of Nambiyândâr Nambi (11th century). This scripture contains hundreds of hymns, the most famous being the *Tiru-Mantiram* of Tirumulâr—a magnificent poetic work on Yoga teaching a mixture of devotionalism, gnosis (*jnâna*), and yogic technology. The poetry of the Shiva saints Appar, Sambandhar, Sundarar and Mânikkavâcakar—generally considered the earliest of the group of Nâyanmârs—still holds inspirational appeal for contemporary seekers.

A great sacred work extolling the devotional approach is the encyclopedic *Bhâgavata-Purâna* or *Shrîmad Bhâgavata*, which was created by Krishna worshipers about 900 A.D. In this extensive scripture (11.6-29) can be found the *Uddhava-Gîtâ*, an instructional dialogue between Lord Krishna and the sage Uddhava, which also circulates as an independent text. In this work (21.26-30), Krishna praises devotion above all else:

The wise person should abandon bad company and associate with the virtuous, for the virtuous ones sever the mind’s attachments by their utterances.

The virtuous ones are independent, Me-minded, tranquil, even- visioned, free from “mine,” free from “I,” beyond opposites, and devoid of clinging.

O greatly blessed [devotee], these blessed ones constantly tell my story by listening to which people are released from sin.

Those who respectfully listen to, appreciate, and recite My story become dedicated to Me and attain faith and devotion to Me.

O virtuous one, what remains to be achieved by one who has attained devotion to Me, the Absolute ( *brahman*) whose qualities are infinite, the Self ( *âtman*) of blissful realization?

Today, the members of the Hare Krishna sect (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) are the most conspicuous representatives of the *bhakti* tradition. This sect is an offshoot of the Gaudîya Vaishnava school of Bengal, which continues the lineage of the fifteenth-century Indian ecstatic Caitanya. The sect’s founder was the late A. C. Bhaktivedanta Swami who, at the advanced age of seventy, came to the United States in 1965 to preach the path of *bhakti* to Westerners. His sect has, among other things, produced many English translations of classical Sanskrit scriptures from the *bhakti* tradition.

*Bhakti* was also the gospel of the silent saint Meher Baba, who has small groups of devotees around the world. But possibly the most noteworthy *bhakti* teacher today—if teacher is the right word—is Mata Amritanandamayi (“Amma”). In 1993, she was nominated as the “Hindu of the Year” by the monthly newspaper *HinduismToday*. (This publication is incidentally a wonderful resource for keeping in touch with the living dimension of Hinduism worldwide.) Over the last few years, the charismatic Mataji has experienced a meteoric rise to fame in Western countries, which she regularly visits. She is also known as the “hugging Mother” because at her devotional events, which involve much singing and chanting, she likes to share her boundless love with devotees and guests by not only spiritually but also physically embracing them.

A veritable vortex of *bhakti* is Mother Meera, who resides in a small village in Germany. Thousands of people from around the world have pilgrimaged to her *âshrama* to receive her blessings in a simple ceremony. Mother Meera is not a teacher but a profound spiritual presence that has helped countless seekers to strengthen their spiritual practice, regardless of their particular path. She demonstrates the power of silent, unconditional love and awakens it in those who are receptive to her blessings.

Short of participating in one of these or other similar groups, students of Bhakti-Yoga are reduced to making their own connections to the Divine. Regular study of the existing *bhakti* literature and recitation of the classical works, whether in Sanskrit or in English, have traditionally been considered very important tools for the *bhakta*. They are even more important for the contemporary student of Bhakti-Yoga, who tends to be ill informed about Yoga. It is always possible to approach Bhakti-Yoga merely as a devotional activity, without engaging the mind. But this orientation contains pitfalls, especially for the Western practitioner, as it can lead to immature, cultic behavior. The great preceptors of traditional Bhakti-Yoga, notably Râmânuja and Yâmunâcârya,

demonstrated that devotionism does not need to be mindless. On the contrary, their realizations showed very clearly that gnosis and devotion are fully complementary.

### **Resources**

Prem Prakash, *The Yoga of Spiritual Devotion*. Rochester, Vt.: Inner Traditions, 1998.  
Swami Vivekananda, *Karma Yoga and Bhakti Yoga*. New York: Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Center, repr. 1982.

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